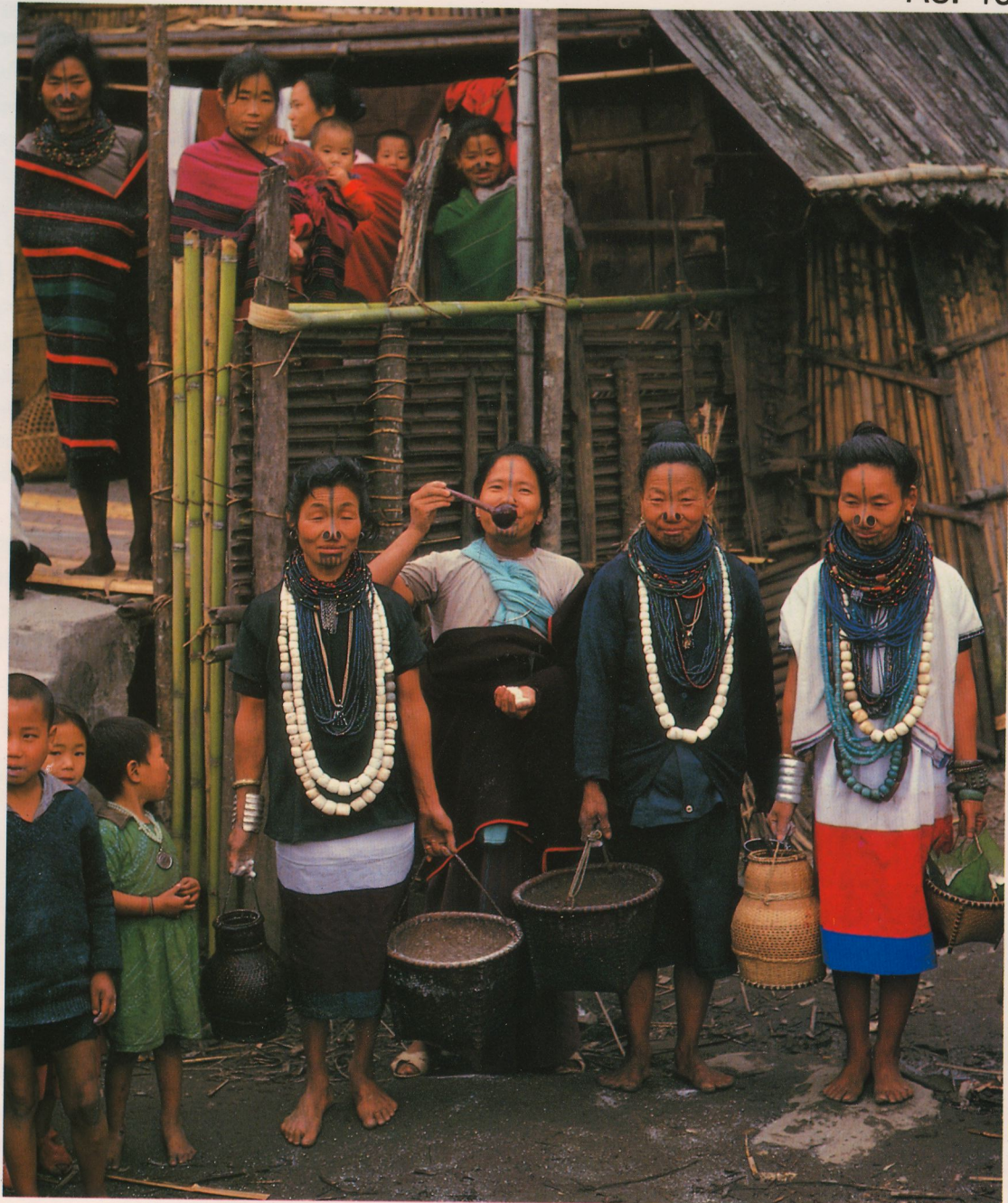


# Discover India

MAY 1993

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ARUNACHAL PRADESH Hidden land in the hills

PAHARI MINIATURES A court art

Draping designs



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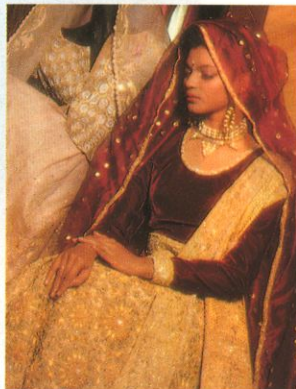
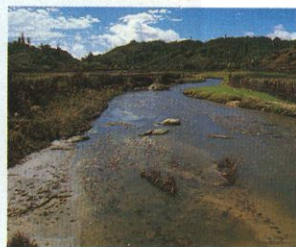
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# ZEN AND THE TIGER

Text and photographs: Nihal Mathur

A vivid and absorbing account of the jungle and its denizens. The author observes the Big Cat after a big feast, as it lazes and philosophizes by the water's edge.



ain the night before had washed the sand away and imparted an unusual clarity to the stone and vegetation. A black necked stork stood perfectly still in the waters like the tussocks of grass in sharp detail. Framed by the meditative trance of my mind, the jungle pool was transformed into a zen rock garden in the early morning light.

Preternaturally alive to danger, the stork with sudden flapping of wings lifted and sailed away. Moments later, the tiger stepped out of the grass with magnificent strides. It had had more than a meal the night before, feasting on a sambar stag and now it was headed for the water for a drink and to escape the heat of the rising summer day.

The tiger came up to the water's edge, sat on all fours and slowly began to drink. It paused every now and then

to survey the scene but was completely blind to the performance of the white-bellied drongo that danced above the water a few feet away. Like a crazy dervish, this black bird, the size of a magpie, whirled above the pool snapping up dragonflies and other insects. Tracing intricate patterns in the air, the drongo nosedived occasionally in a stunning act to skim the water surface. But the lord of the jungle was unmoved by such powerful avionics of the drongo and continued to lap up the water.

Skirting the waters, a varanus lizard crawled ponderously between the stone and grass by the pool's edge. Meanwhile, the tiger — now fully quenched, stood still, taking note of the lizard, but only in passing. Unaware of the master predator, this miniaturized descendant of the dinosaur carried on its quest for food without interruption and disappeared behind a rock.

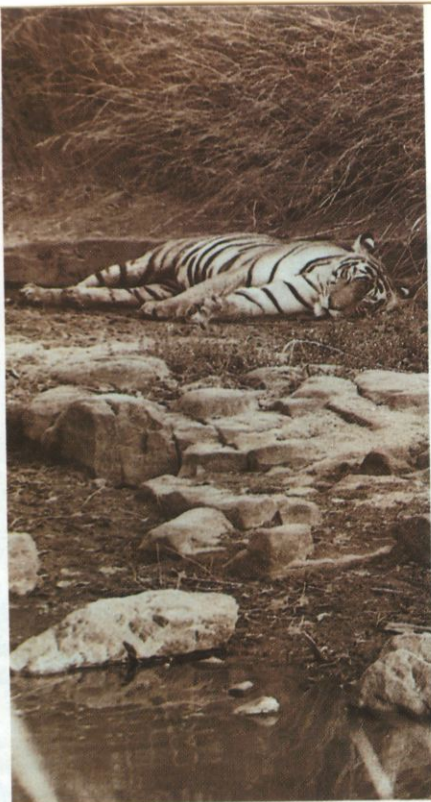
Emerging from behind the scarp, a black vulture made a recce flight over the waterhole while the keen eyes of the tiger followed the scavenger that came and landed on a stony ledge not far behind. Annoyed by an unwanted ugly guest, the tiger turned to face the intruder and grimaced. Unaffected by such hollow display of displeasure, the vulture remained unflappably reserved and the tiger moved away to sit in the water, by the pool's edge.

In the murky greenish waters, small frogs scampered about like little idiots in a ballet for the insane. Sitting quietly doing nothing, the tiger was not amused by the antics of our acrobats in this circus of jungle life. On the other hand, the tiger seemed deeply reflective on matters of self, his place in the ecosystem, wildlife conservation and the nature of life on the planet...

But not for long can one contemplate subjects so serious, especially after a







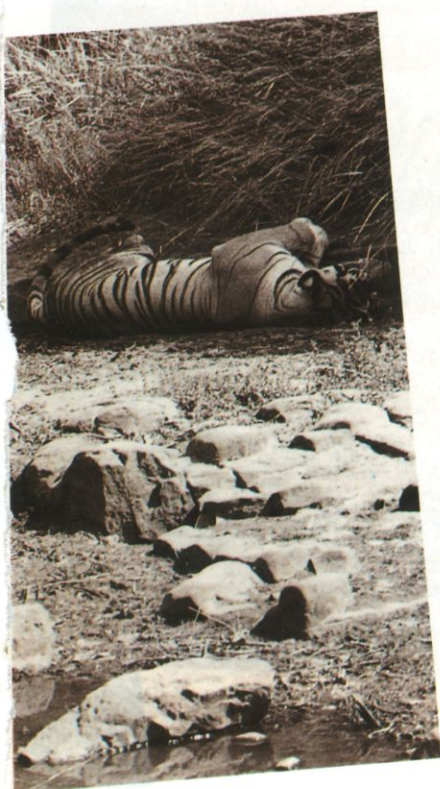
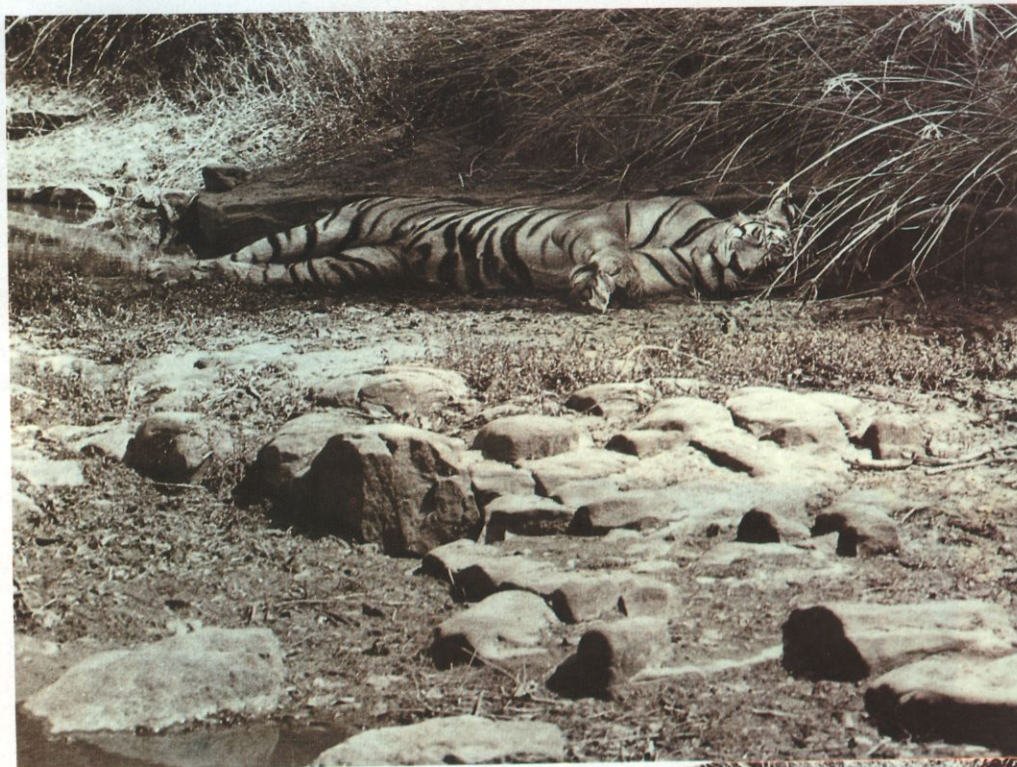
empty and marvelous, a separate world gradually came alive. First to descend on the scene was the lapwing that went knocking about on a pair of tall legs, apparently looking for nothing. A tree pie came next and perched on the branch above the sleeping beauty. It was shortly joined by a pair of blue jays that made a brief transit stop to see the comatose carnivore before resuming their courtship flight full of spectacular barrel rolls, tail spins and somersaults.

The hours passed by slowly and a sweet breeze blew even as the sun

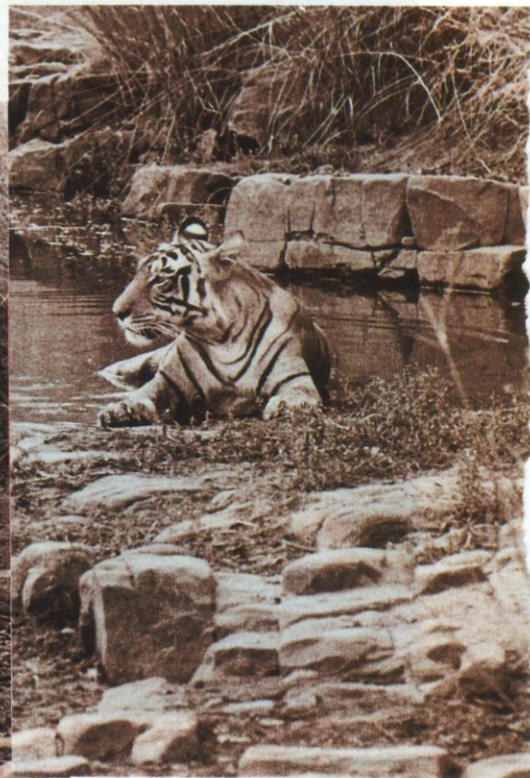
steadily climbed up. In the shimmering heat, the stupor of sleep was complete as the tiger rolled and lolled, with legs splayed out to let the winds fan the body while the mind roamed the wild spaces of its imagination — sometimes drifting like a cloud, other times flowing like a stream. And almost like a fantasy, the paradise flycatcher, that bewitching fairy of the forest, flew into the frame like a mid-summer afternoon's dream. Oblivious of the breathtaking loveliness of this plumed bird, the tiger slept breathing deep and heavy, lulled by

massive meal. As the day got hotter, the thoughts began to space out and the tiger looked drowsy, on the verge of sleep. He hauled himself up from the water to sprawl out under the shade of a tree by the grassy patch. Ahhh. But sleep does not come so easily. Not when these flies are such a nuisance and periodically the tiger swished his tail to ward off the irritants.

**S**lowly the tiger slipped into sleep, unmindful of the flies in the day long siesta. And, as the tiger sank into a state of being truly











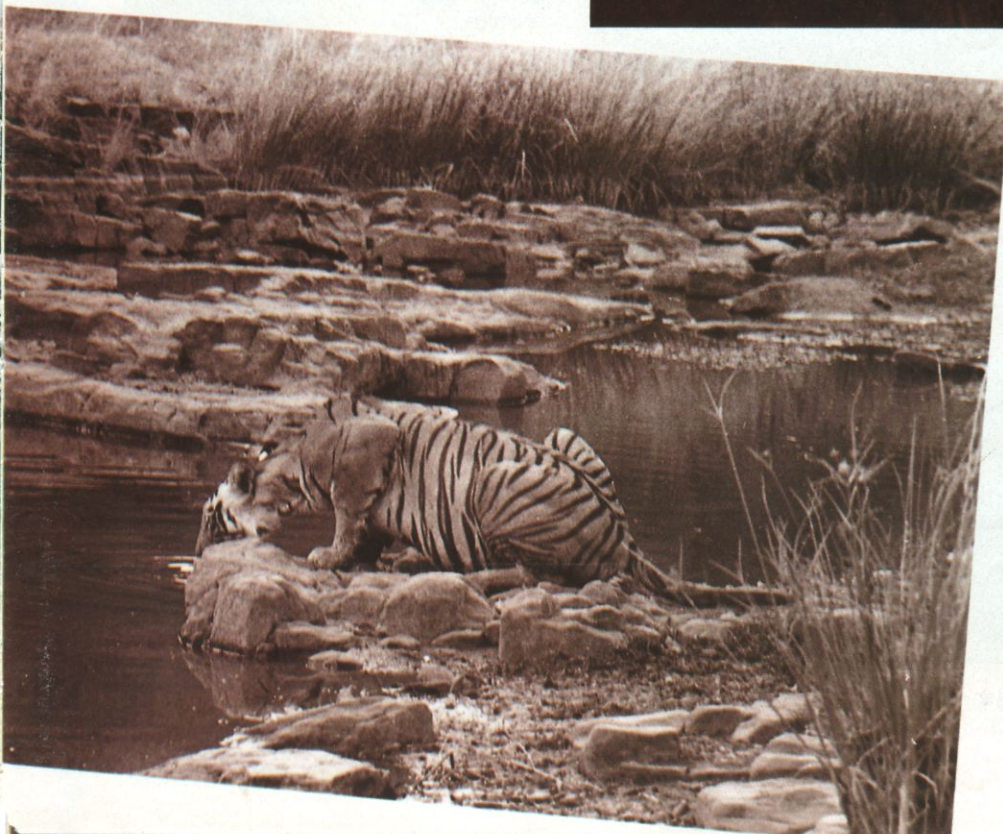
reeds very close to the cat that finally decided to call it a day. Sitting up, the tiger yawned unabashedly in the company of babblers busy in a bush. At last the tiger got up and stretched, to squeeze lethargy out of every bone and muscle and without a moment's pause or hesitation, strode out as magnificently as it had arrived.

In the swiftly changing evening, I was left alone with my thoughts that were now charged, like the atmosphere, with a nervous energy of a forest preparing for the night. The twilight air was rich with sounds. Deer belled out in the distance. An all male band of monkeys raised a raucous

gentle westerlies.

But day dreams are often broken by a sudden rush of reality. The croaking of a crow instantly awoke the tiger. No thought – only action! Alert, with all its senses tuned to the surrounding jungle the tiger jerked its head up to see what the crow was advertising and, assured there was nothing of consequence, turned on its back and was asleep once again.

But not for long. Dipping down rapidly, the sun was losing its singe and the shadows of a late afternoon began to lengthen into evening announced by the peacocks. A covey of partridges were busily grubbing for seeds and insects under the canopy of



alarm in the valley ahead. There was rustling in the undergrowth. And, in the dissolving light, the nightjar began its rhythmic chant .... chak-koo, chak - koo, chak - koo, chak - koo ...